

Blackboard Effective Practice Guide

'I'd be lost without Blackboard. It's really helpful' student comment, Blackboard Student Survey

Blackboard is a virtual learning environment, a password-protected online system for supporting teaching, learning and assessment, as well as blended learning and eLearning. A Blackboard Course is an online extension of the classroom space accessible by both learners enrolled in the specific course and the lecturer who is responsible for teaching the course.

Blackboard enables you to provide online resources and activities that support your students' learning. This short guide offers advice about simple, practical steps that you can take to enhance its educational value and improve your students' experience.

Recommended Practices and Resources

These recommendations can help you when getting started with your Blackboard course:

- Use **Announcements** to keep your students informed about important course information and deadlines, and to prompt engagement with learning resources and activities. Remember new announcements will appear as notifications on students' smart devices if they have installed the *Blackboard App*.
- Provide basic **staff information** such as your name and email, and office hours if appropriate.
- Add **information about the module** such as the module's learning outcomes, reading list, and assessment details. Include a link to a copy of the module syllabus.
- Give **information about assignments** including assignment briefs and details as appropriate, as well as marking criteria and deadlines.
- As pedagogically appropriate, provide copies of **lecture support materials** such as handouts, PowerPoint slides and worksheets. These should be organised in folders so that they are easy to locate, for example by topic or week. (Tip: consider sharing PowerPoint slides as PDF with 6 slides per page.)
- Structure the course menu and **organise resources** so they are easy to find. More details on this below.

Although posting announcements and uploading documents takes a small amount of time, this will be more than repaid by the time saved dealing with individual requests and queries from students.

Suggested Practices and Resources

These suggestions can save you and your students time, effort and worry:

- Create a **welcome message** (Announcement) at the start of the course that explains how you will be using Blackboard to support their learning and your expectations (e.g. "You should log into this course the day before each lecture to see a summary of the key learning points and a link to a paper we will discuss in class.")
- Manage **student expectations** by clearly stating that you will (for example) "reply to emails within two working days, so I will reply to an email sent on Friday by 5pm Tuesday. Please look at the Frequently Asked Questions before you email me".
- Create a list of **Frequently Asked Questions** (and their answers). You can use a content item, a discussion forum, a wiki or a blog to do this. A discussion forum, wiki or blog could be set up to enable students to answer each other's questions, saving you time.
- Share resources in **PDF** as easier to view online and print.
- If you add links to **external websites**, select the option that opens them in a new window and are not framed by Blackboard. This makes them easier to read and use. Web links should also include a brief description and why your students might find it useful to visit.
- Use the **Grade Centre** to confirm (or give) students marks, including using a calculated column to confirm their overall CA mark at end of year.

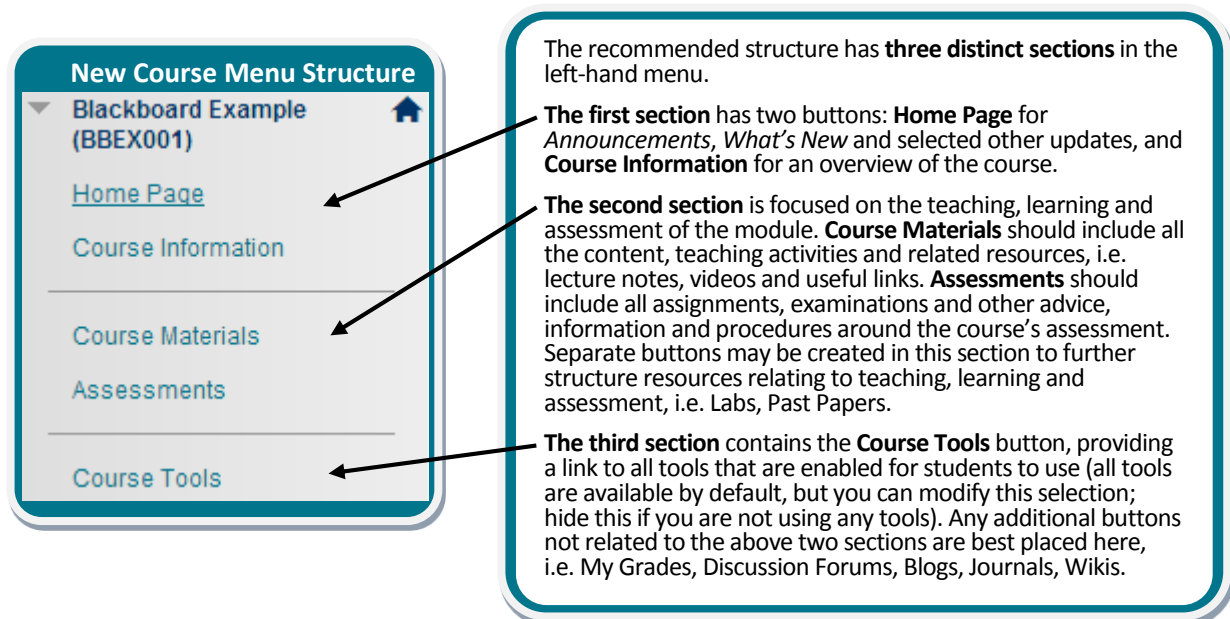
Organise the course's resources

Present students with a coherent, integrated sequence of your face-to-face, independent (out-of-class) and online course activities and learning materials so that they can easily find what you have made available for them. When students were asked for feedback in the *Blackboard Student Survey*, their principle complaint was about poorly organised courses leading to frustration. Thus avoid putting all the resources jumbled together in a single area. Here are some guidelines on making your course easier to use:

- Plan the structure of your course menu (see below)
- It is a good idea to plan the structure of your learning resources before you start adding resources. You can add folders to a content area to organise your resources according to your **organising principle**. This might be a numbered series of lectures or labs (e.g. "Week 3: eCommerce") or a set of themes or topics (e.g. "Care of the Elderly").
- Avoid having folders within folders if at all possible.
- If you need to reorganise an existing course, the easiest method is to create a new content area with the folders you need, and then use the **Move** option to move your resources one-at-a-time to their new location. Don't forget to delete the old content area when you are finished.
- Give each folder a **clear title** plus a **brief description** that summarises the focus of the lecture or the theme/topic. Also add a short description for each item and what your students should do, unless the title is sufficient.
- Make available resources as students require them by hiding unneeded content folders and items.

Plan the structure of your course menu

From September 2014, new courses will default to a simplified course menu structure, providing a level of consistency that should make Blackboard courses easier to use. The course menu of existing courses can be updated to be consistent with this new structure.



The diagram illustrates the recommended structure for a Blackboard course menu. It shows a vertical list of five items: 'Blackboard Example (BBEX001)' with a home icon, 'Home Page', 'Course Information', 'Course Materials', 'Assessments', and 'Course Tools'. Arrows point from these items to a text box on the right that explains the structure.

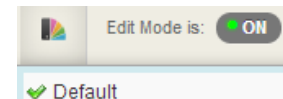
The recommended structure has **three distinct sections** in the left-hand menu.

- The first section** has two buttons: **Home Page** for *Announcements, What's New* and selected other updates, and **Course Information** for an overview of the course.
- The second section** is focused on the teaching, learning and assessment of the module. **Course Materials** should include all the content, teaching activities and related resources, i.e. lecture notes, videos and useful links. **Assessments** should include all assignments, examinations and other advice, information and procedures around the course's assessment. Separate buttons may be created in this section to further structure resources relating to teaching, learning and assessment, i.e. Labs, Past Papers.
- The third section** contains the **Course Tools** button, providing a link to all tools that are enabled for students to use (all tools are available by default, but you can modify this selection; hide this if you are not using any tools). Any additional buttons not related to the above two sections are best placed here, i.e. My Grades, Discussion Forums, Blogs, Journals, Wikis.

Creating a visual identity for your Blackboard course

Most Blackboard courses look very similar. This is generally a good thing since students can rely on a consistent user interface, but does mean that they lack a distinct visual identity.

- The **Default Course Theme** is the standard style and colour for IT Carlow Blackboard courses. From the drop-down list, you can also choose from a range of other colours or designs.



For greater choice in the style and colour of the **Course Menu**, go to **Teaching Style** in the **Customisation** section of the **Control Panel**. Make sure there is a good contrast between the background colour and the text colour.

- You can add a graphic banner to your course's Home Page.

This [handout](#) describes how to modify your course menu, add a Home Page, update your course theme and add a banner (includes a link to quickly create a banner).

Blended Learning: going beyond using Blackboard as a repository

For modules previously taught in a traditional face-to-face manner, the thoughtful integration of technology can enhance the learning, teaching and assessment experiences of students. Blended learning involves the thoughtful combination of face-to-face and online learning experiences. It is a planned, integrated approach that facilitates learning.

Blended learning is a flexible term, indicating a position on a continuum between the extremes of traditional courses (no online technology used) and online courses (most/all content, learning activities and communications are delivered online). Debate about the proportion of content/activity that needs to be online for a course to be described as blended continues, with some preferring the term *web-facilitated* to describe face-to-face courses that start to use technology in simple and effective ways, such as using Blackboard as a repository to share course materials, to give grades and to facilitate basic communications.

Blended learning is the next step, using Blackboard to facilitate some online learning activities that complement or replace face-to-face activities. The aim is to support, extend or enhance your students' learning. Here are some **ideas and examples**:

- Provide students with video guides to laboratory techniques that allow them to study the techniques and procedures before they get to the lab (or to review and revise afterwards).
- Create short weekly self-test quizzes which allow students to check that they have grasped the key points from a lecture and provide them with formative feedback. Their results are recorded and provide you with feedback on their progress.
- Provide students with screencasts showing how to do software tasks, to support just-in-time help for students learning how to use software or undertaking projects.
- Use a discussion forum to facilitate a structured role-playing exercise for groups of students. You could set up a scenario with supporting documents, and then get each group to research other relevant information and agree a solution by a deadline.
- Use a class wiki for students take turns in defining one or two key terms or concepts for each week for inclusion in an online class glossary.
- Set up a blog or journal for each student which they should use to record their thoughts about the readings you have provided. Use these to start debate in class and thereby encourage everyone to complete their readings and think about them.
- Have students work in pairs to create an online guide to a particular topic (using a class blog or wiki).
- Provide students with online resources (collaborative spaces, links to readings, video clips) that students can use in case-based and problem-based learning tasks.
- Share assessment rubrics or descriptive criteria, and use Turnitin to give each student feedback on her assignment's originality.
- Allow for online submission of assignments, and mark and give feedback online (using Turnitin's GradeMark or Blackboard's Assignment Inline Grading).
- Get student feedback using an anonymous survey (using a Blackboard Survey or a Google Form).
- Create a self-study learning resource to replace some face-to-face didactic teaching (*flip the classroom*). This could be a podcast, a narrated presentation, video or screencast, a learning resource with embedded questions and feedback, or some other online activity.

One of the advantages of this approach is that **you can incrementally adjust the blend** by adding appropriate online activities as time and effort allow.

It is important to integrate online learning resources and activities within your module, linking them to what happens in the face-to-face classes. Also make sure you provide clear instructions to help your students make effective use of the learning resources and activities. These instructions can be included in the description of the relevant item (or provided as an attached printable PDF file):

- ♦ What is the student expected to do? Alone or in collaboration with others?
- ♦ Roughly how long should they spend on it? Is there a deadline?
- ♦ What are the outputs? How are these submitted or shared?
- ♦ Is this work checked or assessed? How does it link with face-to-face sessions?

[For more information on blended learning, see UCD's [elearning design](#) overview and Edinburgh Napier University's [3E Framework](#) (Enhance-Extend-Empower continuum approach to eLearning).]

Directing students to other IT Carlow resources

- Refer your students to the *Teaching and Learning Centre's* **TLC Learning Development** course (all students and academics are automatically enrolled). This includes resources on academic skills, plagiarism & referencing, using Turnitin and Blackboard, and a typing tutor. Unfortunately you cannot make a link from your Blackboard course to a resource, so for example you will have to create an item or announcement that tells students to “go to the **TLC Learning Development** course and choose the **Plagiarism & Referencing** menu button to view IT Carlow’s official guide to referencing *Credit Where Credit is Due* and download the anti-plagiarism declaration forms.”
- The [librarians](#) will be able to help you find useful **library resources** and link to them from Blackboard, including links to library book records and online resources such as eBooks, and journal and newspaper articles (see [library support](#)).
- Refer your students to the online archive of **past exam papers** in the **My College Systems** course.

Accessibility

All lecturers have a duty to make **reasonable accommodation** for students with disabilities. In many cases, such adjustments **benefit all** students:

- Many dyslexic students find it helpful to review the lecture notes and slides in advance of the lecture. Uploading to Blackboard a few days in advance, rather than a few days after the lecture, is very helpful in this regard.
- Using a **clear folder structure** to organise online learning resources into coherent groups rather than placing them all in a single ‘lecture materials’ area greatly improves navigation of your course by students. Students with dyslexia or visual disabilities find long lists of resources awkward to navigate.
- Text resources should use a file format that can be understood by text-to-speech software (e.g. PDF).
- Web links should include a brief description and why your students might find it useful to visit.
- Visual or audio resources should have a text summary of their content.

Copyright

You rightly expect your students to obey the Institute’s academic integrity regulations and avoid plagiarism by respecting other people’s intellectual property rights. It is only fair that you show similar respect when uploading material to Blackboard:

- Provide references (with hyperlinks) to quotes/ideas in lecture slides and notes.
- Give your students with a direct link to journal articles – do not upload articles (for example as PDF files) that you have downloaded. Alternatively make students practice their information literacy skills by simply giving the article’s bibliographic details.
- Do not include images you “found on the web” in PowerPoint slideshows unless you are certain that you have permission to use them. There are [many sources](#) of images that can be freely used in education. Acknowledge appropriately any Creative Commons images used.
- It is usually OK to make links to resources you find on the web, although it is polite to ask permission before linking to another academic’s website. Avoid linking to any resources that are clearly illegal, such as a bootleg scan of a current textbook.

Further help

Go to the **Blackboard Support** course for handouts, how-to videos and useful links. Visit [Blackboard’s help](#)

Academic support contact: Damien Raftery, Teaching and Learning Centre ellearn@itcarlow.ie

Technical contact: Gemma Dermody, Blackboard Administrator blackboard@itcarlow.ie

Lifelong Learning Blackboard support contact: Clodagh Byrne, Lifelong Learning Centre LLL@itcarlow.ie

Credits & useful references

Partly adapted from: University of Southampton [Blackboard Good Practice Guide](#) (CC BY NC)

UCD [Recommended Structure and Good Practice in Blackboard](#) guide and [elearning design](#) overview

University of Leeds [Seven Principles of Good Practice for teaching with the VLE](#) (links aspects of the VLE to Chickering and Gamson’s Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education) and [Ten things](#) (ten tasks, ten minutes each, ten ways to improve your module)

University of Manchester [Good practice in Blackboard course design](#)